



# LEWIS & CLARK CITY-COUNTY Health Department

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**For IR Public Health Column**

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## **No Reason to Hesitate to Vaccinate**

**By Melanie Reynolds  
County Health Officer**

Yep, it's flu season again. Although we haven't had a confirmed case yet in Lewis and Clark County, we know from past experience that it's only a matter of time.

From 2010-2013, we averaged more than 400 confirmed cases of flu a year in our county. Many more cases no doubt went unreported. That's a lot of miserable friends and neighbors, lost time at work and school, and extra medical costs.

Worse yet, anywhere from 3,000 to 49,000 people actually die of flu-related causes each year in this country, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC). Many are small children whose immune systems haven't had time to develop. Pregnant women, elderly people in poor health, and people with chronic illnesses are all at a higher risk of dying from flu.

What's sad about these statistics is that the flu – like many other infectious diseases – can be prevented through vaccination.

What's even sadder is that myths about the safety and effectiveness of vaccines continue to circulate, even though they've been soundly and scientifically debunked.

Here are some of those myths and the facts about the benefits of vaccinations:

**Myth:** Vaccines aren't safe.

**Fact:** Vaccine makers must meet the highest standards of safety in this country. By law, vaccines must be tested for years before they can be licensed and distributed. Once in use, vaccines are continually monitored for safety and effectiveness. As a result, the United States has the safest, most effective vaccine supply in history.

You're far more likely to be seriously harmed by a vaccine-preventable disease than by a vaccine.

**Myth:** Vaccines can cause autism.

**Fact:** Scientists agree that there's no association between vaccines and autism. The American Medical Association, American Academy of Pediatrics, Institute of Medicine, and World Health Organization all say there's no connection. Research shows that autism rates are the same in vaccinated and unvaccinated children.

**Myth:** A lot of diseases, like polio and measles, have pretty much been eradicated in this country, so there's no need to be vaccinated anymore.

**Fact:** Although some diseases no longer occur here or are extremely rare – mostly due to vaccination programs – the infectious germs that cause them are still circulating in some parts of the world. And in this day and age, that means they're only a plane ride away.

Measles is a good example. Just four years ago, measles had all but been stamped out in this country. So far this year, close to 600 cases have been reported in 22 states, according to the CDC. Health experts say travelers are bringing the virus here from other countries and spreading it among unvaccinated people.

The diseases we can vaccinate against will return if we stop getting vaccinated.

**Myth:** It's dangerous to get vaccinated against several diseases at the same time.

**Fact:** Scientific evidence shows that giving several vaccines at the same time, or even in the same shot, doesn't hurt a child's immune system. Children are exposed to lots of foreign substances that trigger an immune response every day, even through the food they eat. Giving several vaccinations in one clinic visit saves time and money. Combination vaccines, like the measles-mumps-rubella (MMR), mean fewer injections.

**Myth:** Vaccines contain thimerosal, a preservative that includes mercury and is hazardous to health.

**Fact:** Extensive research has found no link between thimerosal and any health problem. Still, as a precautionary measure, thimerosal was removed from routine childhood vaccines beginning in 2001.

**Myth:** Getting vaccinated against the flu can give you the flu.

**Fact:** The flu vaccine given by injection doesn't contain live flu virus, so it can't give you the flu. The nasal spray vaccine contains a weakened form of the virus. It's very unlikely for someone to get the flu after being immunized. But the vaccination does take two weeks to reach its full effectiveness.

**Myth:** Only children need vaccinations.

**Fact:** Vaccine-preventable diseases remain a threat throughout our lives. Adolescents need boosters for some childhood diseases, as well as vaccines that prevent cervical cancer. Some college-age students need protection against meningitis. Adults need vaccines for shingles and pneumonia. If they spend time around infants, they should also be immunized against pertussis (whooping cough). Of course, everyone over 6 months old should get an annual flu vaccine.

That said, I do want to stress the importance of childhood vaccines. They are one of the best ways parents can protect infants, children, and teens from 16 potentially harmful diseases. Yet only two of three toddlers in Montana are fully vaccinated, according to the 2013 National Immunization Study.

The health department provides immunizations at regular walk-in clinics every Monday, Wednesday, and Friday, 11 a.m. to 4:30 p.m., at the Health Center, 1930 Ninth Avenue. No appointment is needed, and we can bill all insurance.

You can get more information about immunization schedules on our website at [www.LewisAndClarkHealth.org](http://www.LewisAndClarkHealth.org). It's under the Immunizations tab in the lefthand navigation menu.

To learn more about vaccine safety, visit the CDC website at [www.cdc.gov/vaccinesafety/](http://www.cdc.gov/vaccinesafety/)